



## Time Lines. The Potthouse by BOX architects. Perspective Journal

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## TIME LINES

Archaeology and architecture are interlocked in time; invisible cities lie above and below the pavement. Belfast's shifting cycles of urban growth and decay, have absorbed, embedded or erased much of the city's unique past. The Victorians - masterful in their race to build new civic and mercantile infrastructures - left as debris, the traces of previous generations under the foundations of their grand structures.

Cathedral quarter - one of the oldest parts of Belfast - contains many traces of the city's past. Recently a change of fortunes has brought cafes, restaurants and many new businesses back into an area that still has many visible reminders of previous decay and abandonment. Public Art - the tell tale emblem of regeneration - is appearing across the quarter, as

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developers vie with one another to buy into the aspiration to make it Belfast's Temple Bar.

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building of offices and bars, refers in part to the dusty white ashlar of St Anne's Cathedral. Like a displaced baptistery of luminosity adrift from the Cathedral, the new building contrasts with the brickwork and ageing stonework of the surrounding area.

When Colin Conn and Robert Jamison of BOX traced the history of the site, the search revealed the presence of Belfast's first pottery, which was in operation from 1697 to 1725. An archaeological dig in 2003, produced some twenty thousand artefacts, which to date is the city's most significant historical find.

Using maps and plot records, BOX have unravelled the various historical urban layers. The pottery building was originally set back from the street line of what is now Waring Street. It had an access route called Potthouse lane, which is now called Hill Street. A line of terrace houses once originally defined the edge of Waring Street. As the city grew, this urban configuration was absorbed into the fabric. The discovery of this urban layering is conceptually and organisationally utilized by BOX in the design of the Potthouse building. It registers in its ►



## THE TEAM

Client / Peter Dolan Jermion Developments / Mark Beirne Life Inns

Architect / Box Architects  
Colin Conn, Robert Jamison

Quantity Surveyor / Durnien.com / Bruce Shaw

Structural / Brian Murray

Mech & Elec / Dynamic Design

Main Contractor / Turley & Co / PS Building Services

Photography / Todd Watson / Box Architects

Left / Stone corner

Right / View from waring street / skipper street junction







► footprint and volume, the traces of compressed urban time, as well as remembering the important past functions of the area in its name.

In addition to considering the historical urban structure, the notion of extruding this diagram vertically, allowed the void or slot – the original space between the pottery and wall of houses – to take on a three dimensional figure that reveals the split between the alcove cubes and bars. This slot engages the scale of the adjacent buildings on Waring Street and Cotton Court, and in a sense, becomes a building within a building.

The process of clay firing that took place in the original 17th century pottery is recalled. The associative references of the Saggar and Trivet – the method for stacking the clay to be fired in the kilns – is implied in a number of ways: the stacking of the cubic alcoves along the street frontage and the overall stack of the bars and offices within the building's frame. The inter-related levels of the Potthouse Bar and Grill, The Sugar Room Night-Club and the Soap Bar Guest Room, are signalled by this glazed space, with its ribbon of Reglit glazing exposed on the outside of the white volume.

While the three floors of offices are accessed from the building's northwest corner with Hill Street, the lower three public levels are accessed mainly in relation to Cotton Court. The ground floor bar, has had its entrance displaced to Hill Street, due to an outside licensed area to Cotton Court. As one of Belfast's first outside licensed areas, it is to be welcomed, but the restrictions are such that it would leave our European counterparts puzzled by our strict over codification of street life.

The more solid massing of the three floors of offices above the bars, shift

the building into a vertical scale, and contrast with the transparency of the bars. The top floor – a later addition to the brief – is fully glazed and set back from the edge, acting like a glazed lookout over the quarter. The offices with their arrow slit windows glimpse out randomly, while wrapping around, and punctuating the upper volume of the building.

Inside, the first and second floor levels pull apart, to reveal glass floors over a honeycomb of black painted steelwork. This glazed slot, running between Cotton Court and Hill Street, gives a layered sense of space between the bars. The square bay alcoves facing Waring Street, which are stacked over three floors, become populated with the temporary inhabitants of the bars like small houses. The office worker above is more concealed behind the random windows. In this sense the building is a duality of the extrovert and introvert conditions of leisure and work.

The exposed metal frame that holds the glass floor, and is the primary structure of the building, is like a permanent scaffold to pull in light – a rack for stacking the life of the bars. The glass floors induce a moment of vertigo, pleasantly caught in the building's exposed steel cage.

On each of the lower three levels, the bars form a back wall and enclose services and staircases. They act as bookends to spatially contain the streetscape that is pulled in through the picture frame alcoves, and act also to register the diffuse light of the Reglit flank walls. The once vibrant life of the pottery is recalled, as the bars are aglow with our contemporary and colourful imbibing vessels.

The ground level bar and grill have banquette tables to be shared and enjoyed communally. Like large pieces of fragmented crockery, displaced amidst the grid of the steel frame, the



associations with the archaeology of the site are strong. The tables appear like pieces discovered and located in an archaeologist's grid. These tables are designed to provoke exchange between the dinners and drinkers, while the cubic booths provide a contrasting intimacy. The long white tables lift from a dark concrete slab ►

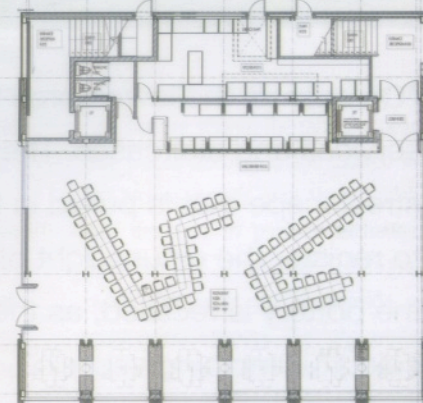
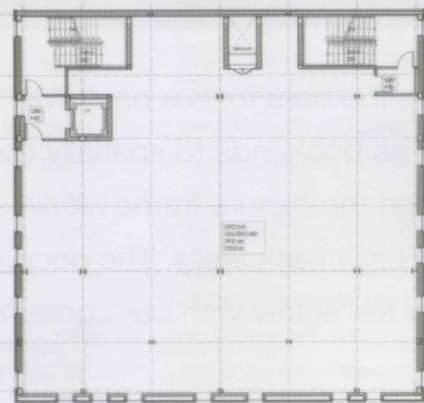
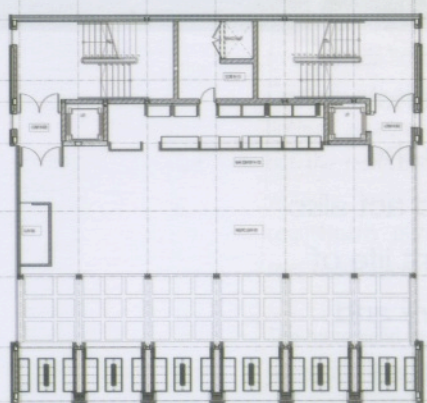
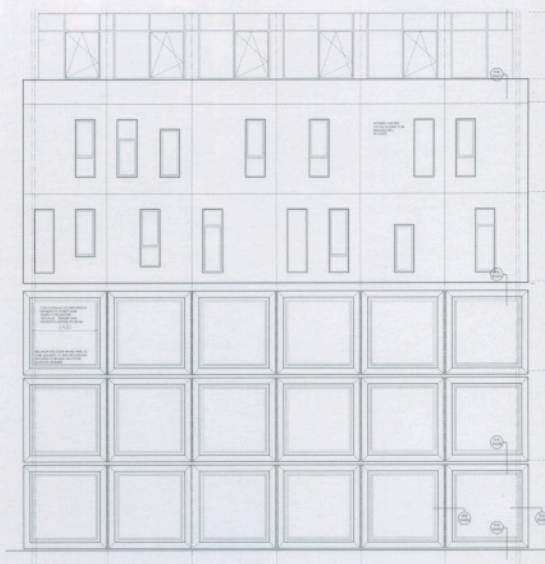
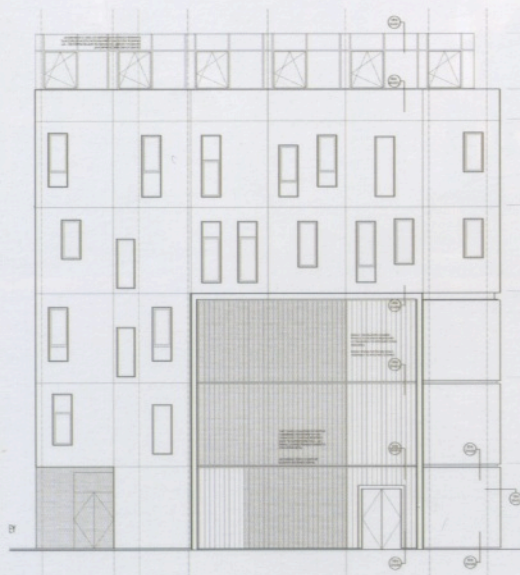
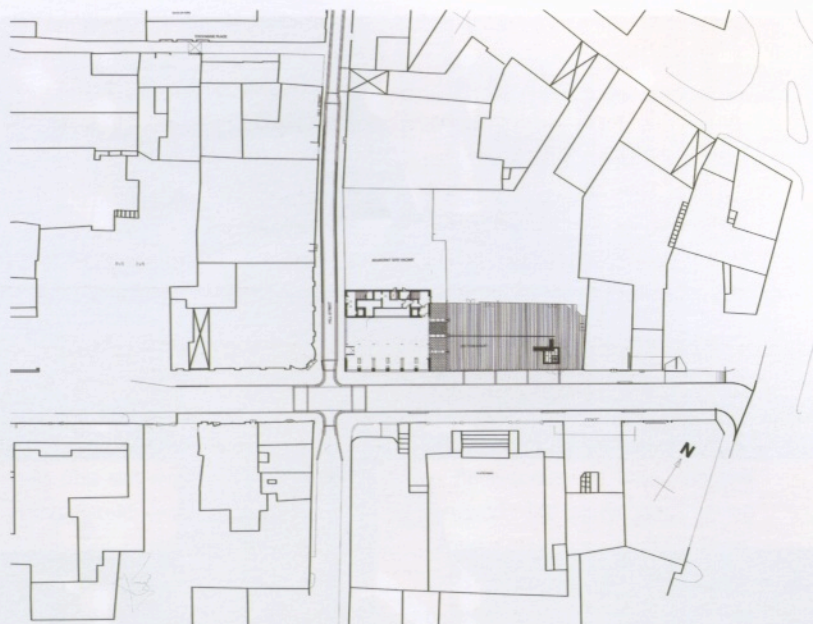




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► and are animated, even when empty, by the oak chairs designed by BOX. Originally the tables were conceived as a more complex overlapping strata. So too the bar walls that were to be fissures of white precast concrete. Omitted from the completed building through substantial cost reductions, much of the rich material intentions by

BOX have been reduced to a minimal palate.

Air conditioning cassettes and services are directly surface mounted. Brutally straightforward with their exposed tentacles and cables. Fuelled in part by the budgetary conditions—this necessity of means and materials

has instigated an approach of clear, simple detailing with such materials as the plywood sheeting that lines the ground floor bar and toilets. The off-the-shelf light unit, deployed throughout, with its intense yellow jel tubes, weaves its way around the doorway to the club outside, tracks the underside of the long benches, ►



Above / Light and Shadow

Below left / Transparent separation

Below right / Vertical glass slice





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Left / Concrete feast table lighting

Below / Patterned light to third floor office

Bottom / the hearth is the home

Right / Verticality

Featuring recently on BBC Radio Ulster's 'Talkback,' the glass floor of the Potthouse was criticized as bringing out "unappealing" voyeuristic tendencies. The gaze upward to the dance floor of the club, brought allegations of "cheap tricks." Transparency always makes us uncomfortable. But the transparency here is about looking down. Down at what is below our feet. To feel the vertigo of what is often hidden in the city. Through the looking glass ▶



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▶ stitches its way through the steel frame and runs up through the staircases. This path of light has a glow akin to the ubiquitous sodium light of the city, but now richer and more vibrant, it charts out the spaces, surfaces and territories of the building rather than that of the city. While the building is perhaps more restrained than the architects' original ambitions, it has a rawness that will age well.









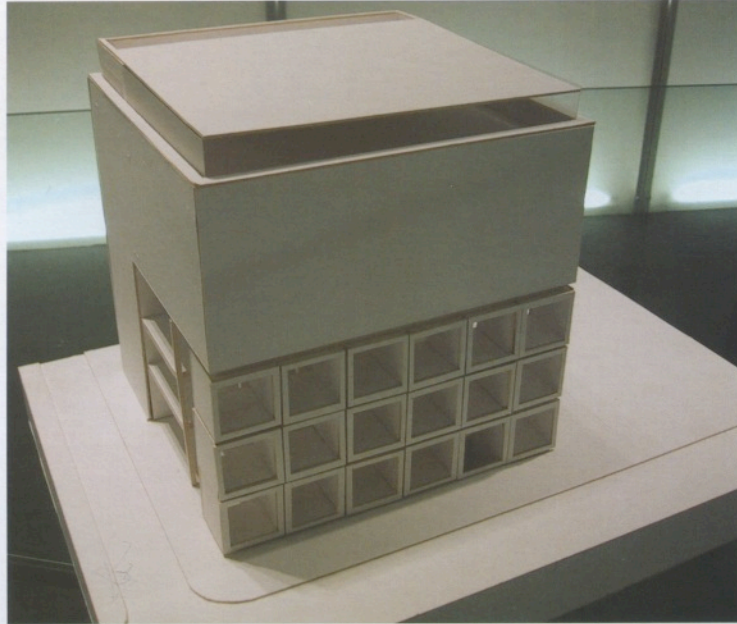




►strata of urban pleasures, we hover over the void of the past. Our seemingly extrovert nightlife, will always be tempered by self-reflective puritanical caution. Architecture should engage and provoke us; question how we inhabit space and our cities. The Potthouse does that.

BOX have designed a modern and successful building that injects new urban life into Belfast's historical Cathedral Quarter. It reveals not only something of ourselves, our dialogue with the city, but of the importance in exploring layers that were once invisible. ●

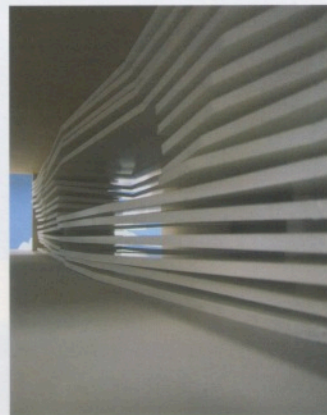
Paul Clarke



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Left / Dynamic concrete feast table



Above / Ground floor bar

Below / Feast Table

